

EDUCATION IN CONDUCTING THROUGH ENSEMBLE EXPERIENCE

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

CHRISTIAN COONRADT

BOHUSLAV RATTAY – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

A young conductor's best chance to learn is in front of an ensemble. Despite the obvious need for instruction, theory, and study, there is simply no substitute for a conductor to practice his craft with an ensemble that will follow his indications and provide immediate feedback on his performance. Many institutions attempt to simulate this experience through practice with recordings, or small chamber-plus-piano groups for conducting seminars, but the ideal proving ground and educational setting for any conductor is in front of a full ensemble.

Throughout my conducting study at Ball State, I rehearsed and appeared with several ensembles: The Ball State Symphony Orchestra, The East Central Indiana Youth Symphony Orchestra, The East Central Indiana Chamber Orchestra, and the Ball State Chamber Orchestra. Each of my performances with these ensembles were prepared by me, and in performances with School of Music ensembles. The culmination of my experience with these ensembles, as well as my conducting experience at Ball State, is the creative project recital. Consisting of a minimum of 40 minutes of conducting in performance, my performance time was juried by a committee of Graduate-level instructors and collected on DVD, which will be submitted to the Graduate School along with this accompanying research paper.

This accompanying research paper will discuss previous research and programs regarding the educational value of ensemble experience to conducting students, as well as

how those studies relate to the creative project itself. I will also include relevant events and findings from my experience with these ensembles as a case study outlining the perceived educational benefit of work with the above ensembles as it relates to the outlined topic. I will draw upon my experiences with Jacob, an undergraduate cellist preparing for applications to graduate conducting programs. Jacob sought out mentoring and experience with the Ball State Chamber Orchestra, and gained valuable experience with the group. He completed a brief survey, and some of his responses are included as they relate to the review of literature.

The main part of this paper will review past literature and studies around the topic of conducting education, especially as it relates to the benefits of including increased ensemble experience for conductors. This review will cover various topics, including the availability and focuses of current education, the agreed-upon characteristics of successful conducting students, and how ensemble experiences can shore up deficiencies.

Review of Studies Related to the Topic

This review of research will focus on opportunities identified within the music education community for better conducting pedagogy and teaching, and how ensemble experience may be able to address these challenges. The research discussed will include the current state and availability of conducting education, its general focus, and opportunities to improve education through the implementation of experience with conducting ensembles. The need for ensemble work in conducting education is not a recent devel-

opment, and previous studies are also included to show the historical need for podium education.

Many studies have been conducted around the importance of ensemble experience within conducting pedagogy and instruction. Several studies relate to conducting's place in music education. Vallo (1990), for example, has published a review of literature involving behavioral approaches to conducting, competency-based education approach, social-psychological approach, and the academic-musical approach. The most applicable to the current topic are Vallo's studies on the experiential approach. Vallo found that, coincident with my premise, those conductors who had worked with and trained directly with an ensemble, rather than simply theoretical practice, scored significantly higher on the conducting test while maintaining parity with their peers in the control error-detection test. This suggests that, rather than spend time spent with theoretical training, conductors would be better served with podium experience, which, according to Vallo's research, will yield significant gains without sacrificing comprehension gained in other types of study, though further research is needed in this area to strengthen that conclusion.

Haldeman (2001) analyzed the availability of conducting pedagogy instruction in U.S. colleges. After surveying 1024 undergraduate conducting instructors, Haldeman found that only 25% of current teachers of undergraduate conducting had been specifically trained in conducting pedagogy. Of the remaining teachers, the majority "created their method of teaching, or have simply adopted the method that they themselves were taught." In addition to highlighting the importance of improving conducting pedagogy instruction, Haldeman found that "a significant number of teachers felt under-prepared to begin teaching conducting, and furthermore indicate that instruction in conducting peda-

gogy would have improved their teaching preparedness.” This sense of under-preparation is natural, and a necessary first step towards confidence and mastery. This challenge can be presented and overcome when in school, under the auspices and instruction of those who have gone before, or it can be presented as the young conductor leaves the educational experience and begins to prepare for the job market. One of these environments presents a safety net, whereby a student can learn from mistakes and develop confidence without fear of reprisal. The other is an unfortunate circumstance of a lack of ensemble experience: facing the challenges of under-preparation in the job market, where a lack of preparation and confidence can lead to joblessness and public failure. Rather than present young conductors with these challenges while trying to make it outside of school for the first time, why not present students with these types of situations and challenges in a conducting program where they have the recourse of experienced instructors to aid in learning? Students would be better served by resolving these concerns while still in school than to compound feelings of inadequacy with the removal of the mentor/teacher safety net. This gets repetitious

St. John (2010) looked into the availability and focuses of current Master's programs in conducting. St. John found that “In the United States, it is at the master's level where beginning conductors often begin their formal education in the discipline of conducting. There are a few institutions where an undergraduate can take conducting lessons, but within the parameters of this study this researcher was unable to identify any Bachelor of Music in Orchestral Conducting degree offered in the United States of America” and that “Compared to the pedagogy of other music programs such as the study of violin, flute, or voice, the codified study of conducting is relatively new.” St. John also found

that 86.8% of Master's programs in conducting also include a recital component, requiring, by definition, experience working directly with an ensemble, though “The vast majority of schools merely state that a recital requirement exists with no prescription as how to execute it.” This is, of course, another area that would be made easier for a student who has already worked with an ensemble and has thus developed the skills needed to program and organize such a recital.

Sinclair (2000) and Porter (2000) examined conducting pedagogy and the development of an exploratory conducting course, respectively. Their findings include the importance of development of social interaction and effective teaching (Porter) and various methods for conductor training (Sinclair). Porter’s finding of social interaction as such a key part of a conductor’s success again demonstrates an area where actual conducting experience in front of an ensemble will develop a needed skill more so than any type of classroom instruction.

Porter also found that “research supports the importance of eye contact and facial expression,” a topic researched in fuller detail by Fredrickson (1992), whose studies “found dramatically higher levels of eye contact among practiced educators,” and that “eye contact by the conductor is only one variable among many that make up a very complex task. While eye contact is not the deciding factor for the success of the conductor, it might be considered an area in which improvement could yield benefits in the teaching and making of music.”

Moss (1989) pointed out that “in both educational and professional settings, the conductor must detect, analyze, and offer solutions to problems ranging from obvious flaws, such as poor attacks, incorrect notes, or rhythmic and intonation problems, to more

subtle aspects of music such as phrasing, expressiveness and interpretation.” However, he also found that there was little research available regarding ensemble rehearsal and ensemble experience, stating, “It is important to music education that researchers analyzed the numerous variables included in this aspect of this profession.” Though little outside research was found, it is clear from Moss's research and experience that ensemble experience is important to the education of any conductor. The abilities present in a successful conductor can only be honed through actual experience with musicians on the podium.

Arnold (1991) researched the use of recording equipment to aid in the development on conducting skills and gestures. The progression of technology in miniaturizing and commoditizing medium-quality video recording equipment, along with its importance as shown in studies such as Arnold's, has led to the standardization of video recording as part of the rehearsal, teaching, and job applications of conductors. The wide and cheap distribution models presented by the Internet will only continue to strengthen the position of video in conducting education.

However, such recording and analysis can only be truly effective when used in conjunction with live musicians, as represented by the experiences with Jacob, the undergraduate student. When asked about the benefits of working directly with an ensemble, he reported that he appreciated the ability to see his own gestures while hearing the orchestra react to his gestures. Without this connection, the “feedback loop,” as he called it, would be broken, and would have resulted in a retreat back to theoretical techniques rather than clear cause-and-effect experienced and recorded for later study.

Madsen (1992) surveyed various experts and students, and found that the top five characteristics of good music instruction were (in order of frequency listed): Quick pac-

ing, Appropriate vocal modeling, Competent conducting gestures, Appropriate approval, and Good eye contact, all skills developed and corrected best when working with an ensemble. As already assessed, these skills can be gained best by ensemble (podium) experience, and it is the ensemble which will provide the most immediate feedback to a bad gesture, lack of eye contact, or bad pacing. Madsen also found that a significant gap exists between students' perceptions on their teaching and evaluation by experts. I posit that this gap can be narrowed through further experience with an ensemble as both a feedback tool and experience builder for those unsure of their ability.

No matter how well a lesson is planned or how skillful the teacher might be in making decisions, the link that transfers ideas from the teacher to the student is communication. Researchers have investigated the ways that effective teachers communicate with their students, including the use of intentional non-verbal communication, unintentional messages hidden in body language and facial expression, and the use of various verbal strategies. (Saunders, 1990)

Saunders presents the key to any conducting curriculum, which is that despite the training and experience of the teacher, all that the teacher knows is rendered inert if the teacher is unable to *communicate* the relevant information to the ensemble. As already discussed, much of the current focus of conducting education is focused on certain key skills that are essentially methods of communication. Like a second language, these communication skills, or the “grammar” of conducting, must first be taught to ensure un-

derstanding, but any experienced foreign language teacher will cite the importance of immersion in developing skills such that they become second nature. This idea of immersion is crucial to conducting education; as much as knowledge can be developed by learning and researching, it is through *experience* communicating with an ensemble that a student conductor will forge these skills into a cohesive whole.

Saunders also cites the importance of pacing, saying that those “directors who can communicate their ideas quickly and efficiently will make the best use of limited rehearsal time.” Anyone with ensemble experience knows that intelligent programming of rehearsals is as important as programming a concert. With limited experience, young conductors frequently fall into two traps. They tend to either over-program (giving too much detail or taking too much time on a specific concept or section of music) or under-program (arrive at the end of a rehearsal without a plan for what to rehearse next). Both mistakes have their own pitfalls, but all ultimately lead to decreased confidence from the ensemble and wasting precious rehearsal time. Effective rehearsal pacing cannot be taught, simply estimating the amount of time it will take to cover a specific topic and charting it out. The only effective way to learn is practice. By seeing what concepts will take additional time, and which can be left to individual practice, a conductor develops an idea of how much time to take with similar concepts in the future. In order to determine the appropriate conducting and rehearsal schedule, a conductor must be experienced enough to understand what will work, and what will not, and in which order concepts should be presented in order to quickly and effectively communicate necessary information to the ensemble. Rehearsal techniques are certainly a part of any Masters program

in conducting, but there can be much more effective understanding if the student is concurrently working with an ensemble on a regular basis.

In Natalie A. Steele's (2010) article, *Three Characteristics of Effective Teachers*, she identifies the following characteristics: nonverbal communication, teacher self-efficacy, and servant leadership. Each of these is a character trait, not necessarily a learned skill. The first of these, nonverbal communication, has been discussed and includes important skills such as clear gestures, eye contact, and appropriate facial expressions. The second characteristic, self-efficacy, deals with confidence. A conductor must develop and stand by strong personal beliefs and philosophy as they relate to the conducting and teaching profession. Servant leadership refers to the seeming dichotomy of serving others while still presenting the confidence born of the aforementioned self-efficacy. Each of these characteristics is difficult, if not impossible, to develop without necessary experiences in rehearsal with an ensemble.

Steele identifies the importance of what she refers to as *mastery experiences*, in which a student gains mastery over a particular discipline, technique, or experience, as indicators of success: "To cultivate a strong sense of self-efficacy, individuals must have positive experiences in overcoming obstacles." A similar sentiment is echoed in the experiences of undergraduate student Jacob, who cited "learning a new role of musicianship while others were depending on me" as his greatest challenge in working with the ensemble. His successful experiences in overcoming his challenges were invaluable in developing his own sense of self-efficacy. In his words: "working with an ensemble has...been crucial to begin my development of a 'podium personality,' to find myself within the role of conductor."

Steele views this process as a virtuous cycle, where success begets confidence, and that confidence leads to greater successes: “Once people believe they can be successful, they will persist in the face of difficulty and quickly recover from obstacles in the classroom or rehearsal.” The belief that success is a possible, if not inevitable outcome, will lead to not only the willingness to experiment with new ideas, pieces, and techniques once thought out of reach, but will also provide the necessary confidence that must be portrayed as a leader. These experiences are critical, and the opportunity to work closely with an ensemble will provide both the necessary challenges and opportunities for success that will propel an inexperienced conductor into a position of confidence.

Silvey’s (2009) dissertation, though not directly related to the experience of conductors as it relates to education within ensembles, is nonetheless instructive. His study “investigated the effects of score study on novice conductors’ nonverbal and verbal conducting behaviors.” Fredrickson (1992) also described the factors that influence effective teaching, especially eye contact, and mentioned the importance of effective score study. Silvey found “significant differences” between his control group and those participants who completed more effective study, finding that score study led not only to the increase in knowledge of the score’s material, but also higher ability in other areas, such as eye contact. This is certainly an area where a student is better off with an experienced teacher who can assist in the possible pitfalls related to score study and can help to overcome challenges and avoid needless obstacles.

Hasty’s (2004) study, dealing with the cognitive paradigm associated with the ability or inability to listen, diagnose, and repair issues while conducting, including the divided attention inherent in working with an ensemble. Related is Ulrich’s (2009) arti-

cle, which relates to “Preparing the conductor as Teacher” and emphasizes the need for rehearsal experience and skill in young conductors. While Hasty goes to great pains to examine the issue, Ulrich’s approach is more practical, in developing a step-by-step rehearsal procedure dealing with communication, critical listening, and proper and concise correction in order to arrive at the conductor’s ideal. Of course, both approaches are helpful, and would prove most meaningful when coupled with real experience on the podium, working with an ensemble that will react and give immediate auditory feedback to the conductor’s performance. Learning to properly divide one’s attention amongst several competing thoughts and responsibilities comes as a result of careful practice and work rehearsing. While Hasty does well identifying the problem, and Ulrich suggests a cure, the treatment must be undertaken with a group that will provide the necessary practice for a young conductor to acclimate to the challenge and overcome it.

Conclusion

The reviewed studies as well as my own experiences have shown a clear need for conducting educators to give opportunities to conducting students to work directly with ensembles. These experiences help conductors gain experience, develop important skills, and develops confidence through successful experience in overcoming challenges. However, these experiences can take on a variety of forms and there are several ways to improve conducting education in this area.

First and foremost, ensembles can be developed for the express purpose of giving young conductors experience. These may take the shape of university ensembles, lab

groups, community and youth orchestras. Many times, the student will need to develop these opportunities on their own to ensure their own well-rounded education, but administrators and educators can also help by fostering the correct environment and providing necessary assistance. Administrators can analyze policies related to student instruction and assess any necessary provisions to encourage these types of immersive learning programs. Immersive learning programs may take the form of additional musical groups, like those primarily focused on non-music major students, or youth orchestras. In both cases, there is a significant upside for the university, in the form of both program expansion and positive public relations. These upsides were seen in the development of a new ensemble at Ball State. The new ensemble was covered by a spread in the university's newspaper, as well as a short documentary exploring its purpose and origins. Though there are certainly costs associated with increasing podium-time for conducting students, those costs can work to benefit many aspects of the university.

However, my own personal experience has shown that many times the creation or association with a particular ensemble outside of school will provide experiences unavailable in an educational setting. My experience working as the director of the East Central Indiana Youth Symphony Orchestra, for example, helped me to gain experience and confidence in helping young students, choosing repertoire, and working with parents and administrators, as well as the symphony board. It provided challenges outside of anything I would have dealt with working under an instructor in a school ensemble, and I gained valuable experience through those challenges.

Similarly, working with the East Central Indiana Chamber Orchestra taught me to work with retired musicians and gave me insights into the inner workings of a non-profit

by attending board meetings. It also served as professional development, as I networked within the circles of influence available and went through an application and interview process before being instated at the conductor.

These experiences did not come as a result of my class studies or work with school administrators. They came through personal networking experience and, in the case of the Youth Orchestra, stepping into an opening generally filled by a faculty member when the opportunity arose. These skills are not only important in running rehearsals and conducting at concerts, but will benefit me in seeking employment and creating a résumé for myself as I work professionally.

Jacob, the student I took under my wing in working with one of our ensembles, described his experience as one of great challenges and great rewards, from the “initial nakedness” he felt without the aid of his instrument to the development of his “podium personality.” In just a few months, this experience allowed him to traverse the chasms of confidence and experience that will allow him to continue to learn and strive. As students, school administrators, and educators work to design programs and experiences to aid in conducting education, they would be wise to adopt these ensemble experiences into their plans. Ensemble conducting, like immersive learning programs in foreign language studies, aids in teaching important skills, provides conductors with meaningful experience in communicating their wishes to musicians. Working with an ensemble teaches a student the need for meaningful score study, preparation, and non-verbal communication in a way completely outside of traditional classroom teaching. Inasmuch as is possible, conductors, educators and administrators should seek out these opportunities, and create them where otherwise unavailable.

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